

## [A. J. Manning's Reminiscences]

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Real Estate Dealer, Boom Period

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A.J. MANNING's REMINISCENCES

Boom of the 20's

One of the most active real estate dealers in Miami and vicinity during the 20's was A.J. Manning, who was known to all of his friends as "A.J." He opened his Miami office during 1924, his business reaching its highest peak during the fall of 1925 and spring of 1926. At that time, during a period of 27 consecutive days, he sold \$1,500,000 in real estate.

After the bubble bursted, he struggled along, trying desperately to salvage his life savings invested in Miami property and to remain in business. However, this was impossible; finally in 1927, he was completely "broke" and closed his office. But his spirit was not broken and he went back to his old trade of painting and interior decorating. He had to curtail expenses, give up his lovely home, and move into a smaller house.

The small, frame bungalow, now occupied by A.J. and his wife, is built far back on the lot. It is almost hidden by the profusion of [oleander?] and palm trees, shrubbery and flowers

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growing in the front yard. A drive-way runs along the right side of the property, 2 and as I drove up I saw a large Marmon Sedan parked in front of the porte-cochere.

A small, unscreened front porch looked very inviting with its two large, well cushioned rockers. A table is covered with flower pots containing varieties of cuttings of rare plants and, on the floor, larger containers are filled with ferns and many kinds of shrubbery.

In response to my knock on the screen door, Frances, the wife, came from a back room. She is neat in appearance, rather plump, and looks about 50 years old. Her black, bobbed hair is half gray, her features are regular, and she has large expressive brown eyes; she always wears unrimmed glasses, set in gold frames. Her flowered print dress is well fitted; she is wearing white pumps and tan silk hose. Her speech shows a good education; she pronounces her "r's" with care and never drops her "g'." She is from Washington, D. C., altho she has lived in Miami for many years.

"Come in and have a chair, Mrs. Burnell, A.J. will be here in a few moments; he's lying down. He tries to make me believe that working every day has no effect on him, but he usually goes to his room and lies down for a while after dinner."

The furnishings of the living room consist of a three-piece wicker living room suite, a large wing chair standing near the radio, and a floor lamp. A vase full of tall slender leaves and cut flowers 3 is on a table in one corner of the room. At the other end of the room is a highly polished mahogany china closet with full length, curved glass doors. This contains some rare china and silverware. On the walls are a picture of an army officer in uniform and insignia of various orders, including the Knights of Pythias.

Frances said, "After A.J. lost both his big homes in Magnolia Park and Hialeah, he sold most all of the furnishings. That furniture would have been out of place in a small bungalow like this. He kept some things that he cherishes, of course.

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"No doubt you heard about the death of his first wife soon after they lost everything. Isabel was a dear friend of mine. I lived with the family all during the boom, for she never cared about the responsibility of running the household, even tho she always had maids. She was only concerned with the comfort and well being of A.J. and their three sons. She never would go anywhere's without me.

"A.J. had three Lincoln cars in those days, two for business and one with a chauffeur for the family. It all seems like a dream now. After he lost everything, I went back to Washington. It was at Isabel's request that I came back to Miami. Her health broke and she was ill for several months. She begged me to come and take care of her, so that she could be brought home from the hospital. I 4 did, and for eight months she lingered, finally passing away in [1930?].

"I married A.J. two years ago, but his sons resented it so much that we never visit each other. It grieves me, but there is nothing I can do about it. A.J. says for me to pay no attention to them, but I would be happier if he and the boys were reconciled."

At this moment, A.J. came into the room. He is above average height and weights at least 225 pounds; however, he carries his weight well and makes a distinguished appearance. He has an extremely high forehead, blue eyes, blonde wavy hair without the sign of a gray one, in spite of his 65 years, and smooth skin without a blemish. He is wearing house slippers and a dark silk housecoat over pajamas.

Cordially he extended his hand saying, "You'll have to excuse my appearance, for I must have comfort after a day's work. It's nice to see you, seems like the good old days. Frances tells me you want some of my real estate experiences during boom days. Well, I sure can give you a vivid description of that period for I was here before it, during it, and after it. Stuck to the guns, never left Miami except for six weeks to attend the Realtors Convention in St. Louis. Here I am, now, working for a living, all my realty holdings gone,

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nothing left but this little bungalow and it's not paid for. But we're happy in spite of it all, aren't we, honey?" as he pats Frances fondly on the shoulder.

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Sitting down in the wing chair, A.J. asked how this information is to be used. After explaining, he said he is willing to give us any information we desire, provided that he is not identified with the story, for he is very sensitive about having lost everything and having to live in such reduced circumstances.

In other words, I don't want anyone to be able to point me out and say 'Look at the big shot of boom days.' Of course, you understand I had money when I came here—not like many people who had nothing to begin with, then made a fortune and 'belly-ached' when they lost it."

After assuring A.J. that nothing would be published which would link him with the story, he began.

"Before coming to Florida, I was in the real estate business in Washington, D. C. and making good money. My wife, that was Isabel, and I decided to take a vacation to Florida for a change. Our boys, Lionel, Gordon, and Hubert were then 15, 14, and 12 years old, respectively. They were thrilled to death over the prospect of going to Florida and seeing the Indians, alligators, snakes, and what not. So in 1911, we arrived in Jacksonville and engaged a suite of rooms in a hotel.

"Thru business connections, I contacted a man in the chain store business there, who had an estate at Titusville. He invited us to come over there and visit him. We accepted his invitation and were simply entranced with the beauty of the scenery along the [??] River. We were impressed too, with the wide avenues of [magnolias?] and large shade trees hanging with moss. Isabel and I would walk up and down these avenues for hours. The water had a great lure for us also.

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"After a few weeks, I decided to buy a yacht so that we could cruise around Florida waters, and enjoy life. I sold out my holdings in Washington, for we decided to remain in Florida but were not yet sure of just where we wanted to settle. So, for six years we cruised around, staying in different cities trying to decide where we liked it best. Prospects in Miami looked good to me, from a business standpoint so, in 1917, I purchased a home in Buena Vista, opening a real estate office there later.

"Then came the World War and all three of my sons served in the army. That picture is of Lionel," pointing to the framed picture on the wall. "I also had a government appointment at [Muscle?] Shoals for several years.

"In the winter of 1918, I opened a real estate office in Miami and when the boys were mustered out of the service, I opened a paint shop for them. Things were moving along slowly then and, in 1922, there was a panic. Naturally business dropped off some but from 1923 thru 1924 real estate picked up strong, reaching the peak during 1925-26. Frances, please get those papers and books so I can show them to Mrs. Burnell."

In a little while Frances came back into the room with pages of newspapers filled with pictures and articles about real estate activity during the boom period. One full page of the Miami Tribune, showed pictures of A.J.'s beautiful estate, "Green Gables," at Magnolia Park, a sub-division owned and developed by him; also a handsome white stucco home of 14 rooms, located in [Hialeah?], where he owned and developed much acreage. In the center of the page was a picture of A.J. sitting at his desk with telephone in hand. He was president of the Chamber of Commerce at one time.

There were also pictures of the Orange Blossom Special when it made its first trip into Hialeah on the Seaboard Air Line Railway [Jan. 8?], 1927. He showed me a personal letter from [S?]. Davies Warfield, president of the railroad and uncle of the Duchess of Windsor. In this letter, Mr. Warfield expressed his appreciation for the grant of land which A.J. gave to be used as the site on which the depot was built. "Warfield was one swell guy,

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and a good friend of mine. If he were living today, I know I wouldn't be in these reduced circumstances; he'd have backed me up in some kind of business."

He also showed me the write-up which tells about the million and a half dollars in real estate that he turned over in 27 days. Then he handed me a thick, heavy book containing pictures of outstanding 8 men of Miami real estate activity, and their homes, among which were his also.

"Yes, indeed, those were hectic days," A.J. continued, as he puffed on a cigar. "It was then that the 'binder boys' came in existence. All the men wore knickers and heavy wool stockings. With the exception of Burdine's, Sewell's and the dime stores, all the stores along [Fingler?] Street were occupied by real estate firms; but this not sufficient, the binder boys worked right on the street, holding the receipt books and pencil in hand, calling off the acreage and amount of "binder" required, obtaining the deposits from people, who bought lots without having any idea how far in the woods of Florida they might be. Lots at \$5 or \$10 down and so much a month sold like hot cakes, the buyer not even caring where they were or how much the total selling price. They'd have a map and make an x in various places where plans were made to construct the City Hall, Public Utilities Building, Administration Building, and so on. 12 foot sidewalks were already laid, and boulevards mapped out. The people were like wild; the money went to their heads, they thought it would continue forever and became reckless and extravagant; money galore was spent in night-clubs; couples who were perfectly happy and contented with each other became careless in their morals, their husbands holding other men's wives in their arms and vice versa.

"I'll give you one instance of the exorbitant prices of real estate in those days. A client of mine, a French woman named [?], was here on her vacation and couldn't resist the temptation to buy some real estate. I sold her a double corner for \$16,000 on what is today the Boulevard. She listed the property with me and went back to France. The first offer I cabled her was \$90,000. She refused this, replying she wanted at least \$95,000; the

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buyer agreed to pay that amount, and, in the meantime, she changed her mind and cabled me not to let it go for less than \$105,000. The buyer still wanted the site and paid the price, making cash payment of \$50,000, balance on terms. Then the bubble burst and he lost his \$50,000 and the property went back to her. I have all the cablegrams on that transaction in an old trunk and can show them to you some time. A little later that same piece of property was not worth more than \$10,000.

Another transaction typical of the boom was a sale that I made of a lot 110 ft and 135 feet deep on the Dixie Highway, just north of Buena Vista, for \$8,5000. Two weeks later the same lot sold for \$19,500, and three months later for \$100,000.

“A friend of mine from Washington made a hasty trip down to Miami just to see what was going on here—he had heard so much about it—he was on his way to California and planned to spend a week here. I sold him six lots at \$2,200 each. He listed them with me and went on to California, telling me to get in touch with him if a good offer presented itself. Well, he was still on the train when I wired him an offer of \$28,000 for one which, of course, he accepted. A fine nest egg was made out of that deal.

“I sold one sub-division of 52 acres—my first commission being \$12,000. My client then asked me to sub-divide this piece of property into lots and sell them for him. Within 50 days I resold the entire sub-division making 20% on each lot. The commission on that amounted to \$115,000.

“Not all were left holding the bag like I was. Groups came down from all parts of the country. For instance, about ten men would work together, making believe they didn't know each other. They'd buy some acreage and then bid it up higher and higher, finally let some 'sucker' have it, and then they'd get the cash and 'blow.'

“I had a salesman working for me who came to Miami broke. He'd lost a fine big home in Kentucky; his health was poor too, and he thought the climate would be of benefit to him. I gave him a start and he was doing pretty good, then he saw the quick turn-overs being

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made. I had a certain piece of property, just one lot with a small bungalow on it, to sell for \$3,000. He said, 'A.J., I'd like to have that little place for a home for the family;' he showed me a two-carat diamond ring that belonged to his wife, and said she was willing to let it go for the down-payment, so I took the 11 ring and we closed the deal. That's the diamond I used to wear on my fourth finger. I allowed him \$700 for it. Well sir, in three weeks he resold the place for \$15,000, got half cash, and he and his wife blew the town—went back to Kentucky and redeemed their home. I don't begrudge it to the poor devil—he was wise after all.

"Many times, acreage was sold to people without their even seeing it. Some expressed no desire to see it other than on the map, some might feel a little inclined to make the trip, but not too anxious—we'd just tell them 'It's better to buy it without seeing it, especially if it's farm land, 'cause if you'd see it you wouldn't think it's worth the money.' The way people bought blindly in those days, a crooked real estate dealer could sell swamps. I didn't do any of that kind of business, for I was in business to stay.

"Of course, the boon did Miami a lot of harm, gave it much unsavory advertising and, consequently, for a few seasons after, the lack of tourists was appalling. Many people, who came here with money, lost every dollar they had. On the other hand, we all learned a lesson, even tho it proved to be an expensive one.

"After the boom and hurricane of '26, no more/ of that slip-shod building was allowed. New building laws and regulations were put into effect.

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"Lately, I heard that a salvage company has bought up hundreds of notes which people signed when they bought lots during the boom, and then dropped the lots, losing what they had already paid in. This company sends their agents around to try and locate the person who signed the note; if he succeeds the company sends a letter telling the person that if he doesn't settle with them, they will bring suit.



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"Well, after the bubble bursted, I still think Miami could have made a rapid come-back if it hadn't been for the hurricane of Sept. '26. That finished the job. Miami looked exactly like a war-torn town just evacuated by the enemy after a battle. It's wonderful how it has come back in the face of all that has happened since.

"I hung on until 1927, when I went completely broke. I tried my best to save my property in Hialeah for I had \$48,000 cold cash in that place, but it was no use—everything went. Then, in 1929, the stock market broke, the banks failed, and we were left hanging on a limb, so to speak. In addition to losing everything I had, my wife's health failed, and finally I lost her too, one of the best women ever lived in this world—her one fault being that she was too good; yes, too good to the boys and too good to me, I admit it."

Nothing was said for several minutes. Then A.J. picked up 13 where he left off. "Frances here, has made life worth living for me. As for the attitude my sons have taken about her it doesn't worry me at all; some day, they'll come to their senses. They are selfish—never did a thing for me nor their mother and, by god, I'd never ask them for a dime if I were starving. When I had money, I did all in my power for them and their families, but they never did show any appreciation. Hughie lives next door and has not even spoken to me for two years.

"This little place here isn't much, but Frances has made it attractive. An interior decorator herself, she can make even a barn look cozy. Come in and see the rooms."

The living room leads into a narrow hall from which a door opens into Frances' bedroom. A double bed, bedside dresser, dressing table, chair and small rocker are decorated in lavender, with white trimmings. A lavender silk spread is on the bed and a lavender boudoir lamp in on the table. The walls, as well as those of the other rooms, are decorated with a border of hand painted floral. White curtains with lavender ruffles are at the windows. A rose colored velvet rug is on the floor.

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The bath room is directly across the hall. This room, like all the others, is spotlessly clean. Tile floor, built in tub and shower, lavatory and toilet are all new. A medicine chest is over the lavatory.

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Adjoining Frances' room is a larger bed-room which is A.J.'s. Here are large old-fashioned brass bed, mahogany dresser and chifferobe, several chairs to match, a flat topped mahogany desk, swivel chair, and a book-case lined with books. Several pictures are on the wall, one in particular, A.J. told me to look at. It is a picture of his family taken in Washington. They are sitting in his Packard Twin-six touring car and he is at the wheel, his wife, Isabel next to him, and the three boys sitting in the back seat. "Pretty sporty, eh?" says A.J., proudly, as he looked at the picture and smiled.

Across the hall is the dining room. This is rather a small room and the mahogany dining table, chairs and buffet practically fill it. An expensive axminster rug covers the floor. Frances said A.J. saved three rugs when he sold out.

Adjoining the dining room is the kitchen of which Frances is very proud. It is a large room and the furnishings are new. A large Frigidaire stands near the back door. On top of a white porcelain streamlined gas stove is a home-made apple pie. Frances does all her own baking, and pie is A.J.'s favorite desert. "I always make two at once, a lemon meringue and an apple," she said. The kitchen cabinet is finished attractively, which A.J. did himself, also a cabinet under the porcelain sink. He covered the drain-boards on either side of the sink with a brown material which matches the linoleum. The edges of the drain-board are neatly fitted with nickel plated strips. Two windows over the sink have freshly starched, white curtains. A porcelain kitchen table and two white wooden chairs complete the furnishings.

"A.J. likes good substantial meals, always was used to having them, and I figure why not have the best of everything if we can. I may not be following the best rules as to diet for

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A.J. Personally, I'd like to lose some weight; sometimes I go all day without eating, until he comes home in the evening. Then he insists that I sit down and eat with him. Often in the morning I'll just take a cup of coffee and satisfy him.

"We don't spend any money on foolishness, like races, gambling, and such things. I like pretty clothes, but they don't necessarily have to be expensive. A.J. doesn't spend any money on the outside. He likes a little sociable drink, and I have no objection to his having a bottle in the house. In fact, I enjoy a good cocktail before dinner. We like to play cards, and often in the evening, if A.J. is not too tired, we sit and play casino. Five hundred is our favorite game, tho.

"I have no outside interests whatsoever. I don't mind admitting I's crazy about A.J. and my main ambition is to make him happy; I believe I have succeeded. Looking after him is all I care about—I like to keep house 'just so' and plan and cook the 16 meals he likes best. I do most of my own work, except the laundry. A colored girl does that and A.J. wants me to have her do the heavy housework too, but I's trying to save all I can and some day have a better home, more like he's always been used to. I'd work too, at decorating, but he won't hear of it. I do help him sometimes in planning his work. He's getting on pretty good now, gets some fine contracts, and I's sure that in time he'll make a real come-back."

"A.J., what is your hobby?" I asked.

Without hesitation he replied, "Fishing and loving my wife—nothing else matters to me." He went into his room and came out with a new reel and rod. "Frances surprised me with this for Christmas. I know she must have paid at least \$15 for it and I bawled her out, too, for spending so much on me—told me all the time she was giving me some socks and handkerchiefs, then Christmas Eve she comes out with this." From his expression, it was easily seen that nothing could have pleased him more.

"Politics don't interest me very much, except when it comes to presidential election; however, we always vote. I do believe President Roosevelt is doing as good a job as

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any man could do under the circumstances. No matter who had his job, there would be criticism, perhaps a great deal more.

"I's afraid we are not very religious. I am Episcopal and 17 Frances is Methodist. We go to church occasionally; not but what I think it does a person good to go, but after working all week, I like to relax when Sunday comes. Often, we go fishing; we live a quiet, happy life interfering with no one. My mother always taught us that God is love—in the plants, in flowers, in people, in everything of this world, only most people do not see it because they are too much concerned in the 'Almighty Dollar' and too selfish to see anything else."

Realizing the hour was getting late, I thanked both A.J. and Frances for their hospitality and prepared to depart.

"Some time Frances will look in that old trunk and get out a lot more things about the boom that might interest you—old pictures of Miami, too."

Both of them walked out to the car with me, Frances stopping to cut off some flowers for me. The odor of night blooming jasmine filled the air. As they walk back into the house, A.J.'s arm was around her; it is very apparent that, in spite of all that has happened, this couple is ideally happy.